

Mauritania

Wild coast meets Saharan dunes. This should be enough to lure you to Mauritania. If you're still diffident, a limited amount of hyperbole may strike a chord: think grandiose dune fields, ancient cities scoured by sandy winds, giddily deep canyons, eye-popping plateaus, sand seas larger than many a small European country and a phalanx of enchanting oases.

Sure, you may find similar landscapes in other parts of West Africa, but few are on the same scale as those in Mauritania. And few are as varied. Where else could you find such a startling interplay of dunes and ocean? If it's tranquillity you're after, fear not: unlike Senegal, the Mauritanian coastline is completely virginal – expect kilometres of sandy beaches without a resort in sight. And it will remain forever: an immense stretch of seashore is protected, with Parc National du Banc d'Arguin ranking as one of the best bird-watching spots in the world.

For outdoor-adventure types, Mauritania offers the full slate of trekking options as well as exhilarating camel trips amid surreal landscapes, not to mention hot-air ballooning.

But it's not all about nature, landscapes and adrenaline: Mauritania is also of strong historical interest, with a sprinkle of World Heritage-listed caravan towns, all testifying to ancient civilisations. Culturally, Mauritania is a place apart; the population is almost equally divided between Moors of Arab descent and black Africans. It's a Muslim country with a black African twist. This striking combination is part of its appeal.

If you're more inclined to ecotourism than mass tourism, Mauritania is your Shangri-la.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 1,030,700 sq km
- **ATMs** None
- **Borders** Morocco, Mali, Senegal open; Algeria inadvisable
- **Budget** US\$25 per day
- **Capital** Nouakchott
- **Languages** Arabic (Hassaniya), French, Fula, Soninké and Wolof
- **Money** Ouguiya (UM); US\$1 = UM266
- **Population** 3 million
- **Seasons** Very hot (April to October), hot (November to March)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 222; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC
- **Visa** In advance US\$30, at Moroccan border US\$25



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Nouakchott fish market** (p424) Watch dozens of colourful fishing boats roll in with their glistening catch.
- **Chinguetti** (p428) Lose yourself in the labyrinthine lanes of the old city before experiencing the magic of the Saharan dunes.
- **Oualâta** (p430) Push the frontiers by travelling to this remote desert town, one of Mauritania's best-kept secrets.
- **Iron-ore train** (p433) Hop on the world's longest train, and be ready for the bumpiest journey of your life!
- **Banc d'Arguin** (p427) Pack your binoculars and observe vast flocks of birds from a traditional *pirogue* (traditional canoe).

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

It's unsurprisingly dry in the Sahara region of the country, where annual rainfall doesn't exceed 100mm. In the south, rainfall increases to about 600mm per year, mostly occurring during the short rainy season from July to September.

The most pleasant time to visit Mauritania is from November to March, when daytime temperatures hover around the mid-20°C. Note that it can get quite cool at night, especially in the desert.

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** Head straight to Nouakchott's fish market (p424) and spend a couple of days sampling the luscious cuisine of the capital. Then push onto Atâr (p427) and take either a 4WD tour or a camel trip in the grandiose dunefields around the city.
- **Two Weeks** Spend a couple of days trekking in the Adrar, explore the ancient desert towns of Chinguetti (p428) and Oualâta (p429) and revitalise yourself in an idyllic palm-filled oasis. Then forge west to the Atlantic coast and observe vast flocks of birds at Parc National du Banc d'Arguin (p427). Journey on to Nouakchott (p424) and marvel at its striking melange of chaotic markets and modern buildings.

HISTORY

From the 3rd century AD, the Berbers established trading routes all over the Western Sahara, including Mauritania. In the 11th century, the Marrakesh-based Islamic Al-

HOW MUCH?

- **Cup of tea in a nomad's tent** Free
- **Taxi ride in Nouakchott** US\$1.10
- **Camel ride in the desert** About US\$22 per day
- **Bush taxi fare (from Nouakchott to Nouâdhibou)** US\$21
- **Auberge room** About US\$7.50 per person

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$0.80
- **1L bottled water** US\$0.90
- **Bottled beer** US\$1.50
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$2.30
- **Plate of couscous** US\$2.30

moravids pushed south and, with the assistance of Mauritanian Berber leaders, destroyed the Empire of Ghana, which covered much of present-day Mauritania. That victory led to the spread of Islam throughout Mauritania and the Western Sahara. The descendants of the Almoravids were finally subjugated by Arabs in 1674.

As colonialism spread throughout Africa in the 19th century, France stationed troops in Mauritania, but it was not until 1904 that, having played one Moorish faction off against another, the French finally managed to make Mauritania a colonial territory. Independence was fairly easily achieved in 1960 because the French wanted to prevent the country from being absorbed by newly independent Morocco. Mokhtar Ould Daddah became Mauritania's first president.

Ould Daddah took a hard line, especially against the (mainly black African) southerners, who were treated like second-class citizens and compelled to fit in the Moors' mould. Any opposition was brutally suppressed.

The issue of Western Sahara (Spanish Sahara) finally toppled the government. In 1975 the very sandy Spanish Sahara (a Spanish colony) was divided between Morocco and Mauritania. But the Polisario Front launched a guerrilla war to oust both beneficiaries from the area. Mauritania was incapable, militarily and economically, of fighting such a war. A

bloodless coup took place in Mauritania in 1978, bringing in a new military government that renounced all territorial claims to the Western Sahara.

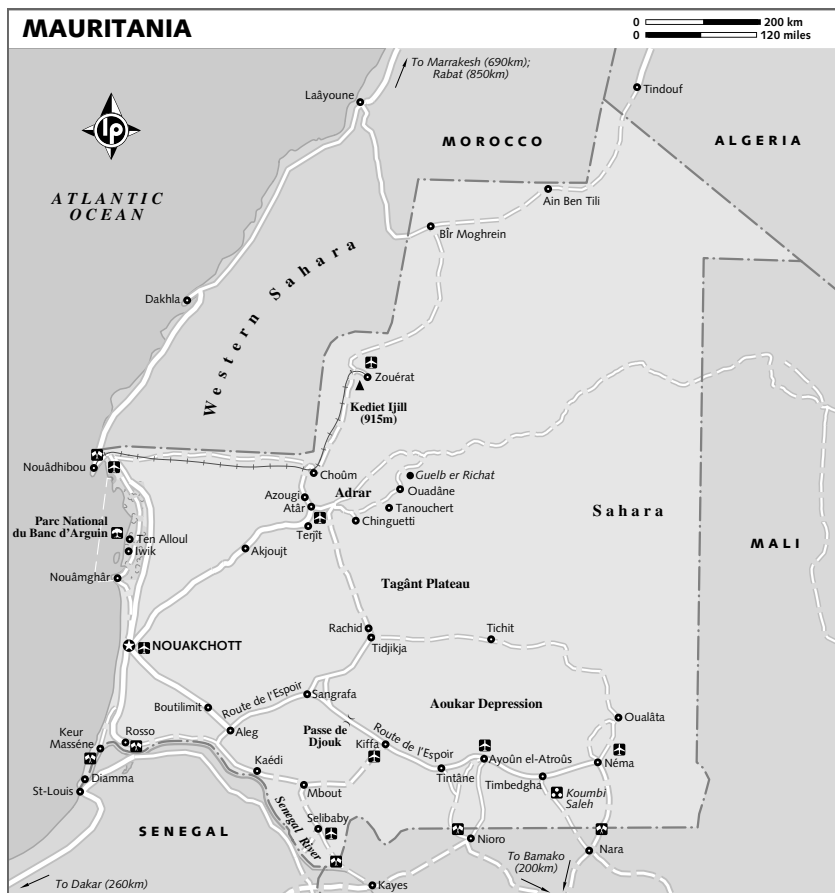
A series of coups ensued. Finally, Colonel Maouya Sid' Ahmed Ould Taya came to power in 1984. For black Africans, this was even worse than under Ould Daddah. Ethnic tensions culminated in bloody riots between the Moors and black Africans in 1989. More than 70,000 black Africans were expelled to Senegal, a country most had never known.

In the 1990s the government became increasingly extremist. In 1991 Mauritania supported Iraq during the Gulf War, and aid dried up. To counter criticism, Taya introduced multiparty elections in 1992, which he won, but

electoral fraud was massive. The harassment and arrest of opposition figures continued, and black Africans still faced discrimination.

Mauritania Today

To everybody's surprise (and relief), Ould Taya's repressive regime came to an end in August 2005, when the president was toppled in a bloodless coup. This marked a symbolic turning point in the country. The new government, led by Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, is intent on putting the country back on its feet and on stamping out corruption. Mauritania seems on the way to democracy: the general elections that were held in November 2007 were fair and no incidents were reported, according to UE observers. But what could really give a



new impetus to the country is the oil boom that began in 2006 with the exploitation of offshore fields off Nouakchott.

CULTURE

Mauritanian society is changing fast. Tourism development in the heart of the desert, the internet and mobile phones have played a crucial role in the last decade. But despite the profound social changes, the extended family, clan or tribe remains the cornerstone of society, especially with the Moors.

As in many Muslim countries, religion continues to mark the important events of life. Although slavery was declared illegal in 1980, the caste system still impregnates society's mentality.

The iconic image of nomadic Moors sipping a cup of tea under a tent in the desert belongs to the past. Over the past three decades, drought has resulted in a mass exodus of traditionally nomadic Moors from the desert to Nouakchott.

Women are in a fairly disadvantaged position. Only a third as many women as men are literate and few are involved in commercial activities. Female genital mutilation and forced feeding of young brides are still practised in rural communities. However, Mauritanian women do have the right to divorce and exert it routinely.

PEOPLE

Of Mauritania's estimated three million inhabitants, about 60% are Moors of Arab and Berber descent. Moors of purely Arab descent, called 'Bidan', account for 40%. The other major group is black Africans, ethnically split into two groups. The Haratin (black Moors), the descendants of people enslaved by the Moors, have assimilated the Moorish culture and speak Hassaniya, an Arabic dialect. Black Mauritani-ans living in the south along the Senegal River constitute 40% of the total population and are mostly Fulani or the closely related Tukulor. These groups speak Pulaar (Fula). There are also Soninké and Wolof minorities.

More than 99% of the population are Sunni Muslims. Islamic fundamentalists are growing in number but remain a minority.

ARTS & CRAFTS

Mauritania has a strong tradition of arts and craftwork, especially silverwork. Most prized are wooden chests with silver inlay, but

there are also silver daggers, silver and amber jewellery, earth-tone rugs of camel hair, and hand-dyed leatherwork, including colourful leather cushions and leather pipe pouches, camel saddles and sandals.

The traditional music of Mauritania is mostly Arabic in origin, although along its southern border there are influences from the Wolof, Tukulor and Bambara. One of the most popular Mauritanian musicians is Malouma. She has created what is called the 'Saharan blues' and is to Mauritania what Cesária Évora is to Cape Verde.

There's some superb traditional architecture in the ancient Saharan towns in the Adrar as well as in Oualâta.

ENVIRONMENT

Mauritania is about twice the size of France. About 75%, including Nouakchott, is desert, with huge expanses of flat plains broken by occasional ridges, sand dunes and rocky plateaus, including the Adrar (about 500m high).

The highest peak is Kediet Ijill (915m) near Zouérat. Mauritania has some 700km of shoreline, including the Parc National du Banc d'Arguin, one of the world's major bird-breeding grounds and a Unesco World Heritage Site. The south is mostly flat scrubland.

Major environmental issues are the usual suspects of desertification, overgrazing and pollution. Overfishing is another concern, with hundreds of tonnes of fish caught every day off the Mauritanian coastline.

FOOD & DRINK

The desert cuisine of the Moors is rather unmemorable. Dishes are limited to rice, mutton, goat, camel or dried fish. However, Mauritanian couscous, similar to the Moroccan variety, is delicious. A real treat is to attend a *méchoui* (a traditional nomad's feast), where a whole lamb is roasted over a fire and stuffed with cooked rice. *Zrig* (unsweetened, curdled goat or camel milk) often accompanies meals.

The cuisine of southern Mauritania is essentially Senegalese and you'll find the Senegalese *maffé* (a peanut-based stew) everywhere.

In Nouakchott and Nouâdhibou, seafood is widely available.

Soft drinks and bottled water are available everywhere. Alcohol is only available at certain hotels and restaurants in Nouakchott and Nouâdhibou.

NOUAKCHOTT

pop 800,000

Nouakchott won't win any prizes for urban planning. Hastily constructed in 1960, at independence, this discombobulating city sprawls 5km inland from the coast. Most travellers use it as a staging post before setting off to Senegal, the Adrar or the Banc d'Arguin.

Although it's not a highlight of the country, Nouakchott is intriguingly idiosyncratic and you could do worse than spending an afternoon at the gloriously frantic fish market (one of the busiest in West Africa), treating yourself to a comfy guesthouse or feasting on fresh seafood in a hip restaurant. It's also laid-back and amazingly safe – in all, the perfect salve after the rigours (and romance!) of the desert.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Most banks, hotels and restaurants are on or around Ave Abdel Nasser (running east-west) and Ave du Général de Gaulle (running north-south). The ocean is 5km west along Ave Abdel Nasser, while the airport is 3km northeast of the centre.

There are heaps of private telephone offices in the centre where local and long-distance calls can be made. There's also a profusion of internet cafés in the centre. There are bureaux de change on Ave du Général de Gaulle and on Ave Abdel Nasser, as well as in the Marché Capitale. Banks are also an option but they keep shorter hours than bureaux de change. They change cash only.

Cabinet Médical Fabienne Sherif (☎ 525 15 71)

Near the French embassy, north of the centre.

Main post office (Ave Abdel Nasser; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Thu, to noon Fri)

Netland (☎ 525 1314; Ave du des Congrès; per hr UM500; ☎ 8am-midnight Mon-Thu, 8am-noon & 4pm midnight Fri, noon-midnight Sat & Sun) Has the best internet connection.

SIGHTS

Don't ever think of leaving the city without a visit to the extremely colourful **fish market** (Port de Pêche), about 5km from the centre. You'll see hundreds of teams of men dragging in heavy hand-knotted fishing nets on the beach and small boys hurrying back and forth with trays of fish. The best time is between 4pm and 6pm, when the fishing boats return – unforgettable!

Culture vultures will make a beeline for the **Musée National** (Rue Mohamed el Habib; admission UM300; ☎ 8am-3.30pm Mon-Fri), which is an excellent introduction to Moorish civilisation.

Unmissable landmarks in the centre include the **Mosquée Saudique** (Rue Mamadou Konaté), with its slender minarets, and the large **Mosquée Marocaine** (Moroccan Mosque; Rue de la Mosquée Marocaine), which towers over a bustling market area.

SLEEPING

Auberge du Sahara (☎ 670 4383; www.aubergesahara.com in French; tent/dm/d UM1500/2000/4000; (P)) A safe bet. Dorms and rooms are ordinary but functional and shared bathrooms are kept in good nick. Other perks include the outdoor area, a kitchen for guests' use, a rooftop terrace and plenty of friendly advice. It's on the road to Nouâdhibou.

Auberge Menata (☎ 636 9450; tent/dm/d UM1500/2000/4000; (P)) Another welcoming port of call, this *auberge* is run by friendly Olivia, who is a mine of local information. Rooms are nothing flash but well tended. Meals are available on request. It's off Ave du Général de Gaulle.

JMC (☎ 641 7624, 667 2832; jmc_organisation@yahoo.fr; r UM5000-10,000; (P) ☎) A haven of peace and comfort, this mellow *maison d'hôtes* (inn) near the Novotel boasts exceedingly neat rooms arranged around a lovely courtyard, an art gallery and a cosy communal room.

Maison d'hôtes Jeloua (☎ 636 9450, 643 2730, 525 0914; maison.jeloua@voila.fr; r UM8000-10,000; (P) ☎) In a peaceful neighbourhood, near Ave du Général de Gaulle, this tidy villa features seven well-appointed rooms. The cheaper ones have shared bathroom.

L'Escale des Sables (☎ 525 2375; www.escale-des-sables.com; Ksar District; d incl breakfast UM20,000-27,000; (P) ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) You've struck gold in this fancy B&B-style option near the airport. Think well-organised rooms with all amenities, snug communal areas, an inviting garden and a nifty pool to cool off in. Meals are available on request.

Hôtel Halima (☎ 525 7920; fax 525 7922; Rue de l'Hôtel Halima; s/d/ste UM26,500/29,500/49,000; (P) ☎ ☎ ☎) The well-run Halima is a solid choice, with well-maintained rooms, good facilities and a handy location. Credit cards are accepted.

Novotel (☎ 525 7400; www.novotel.com; Ave du Général de Gaulle; s UM45,000-58,000, d 47,000-60,000, ste UM62,000-83,000; (P) ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) If you've got the dough, this four-star high-rise on the main drag is

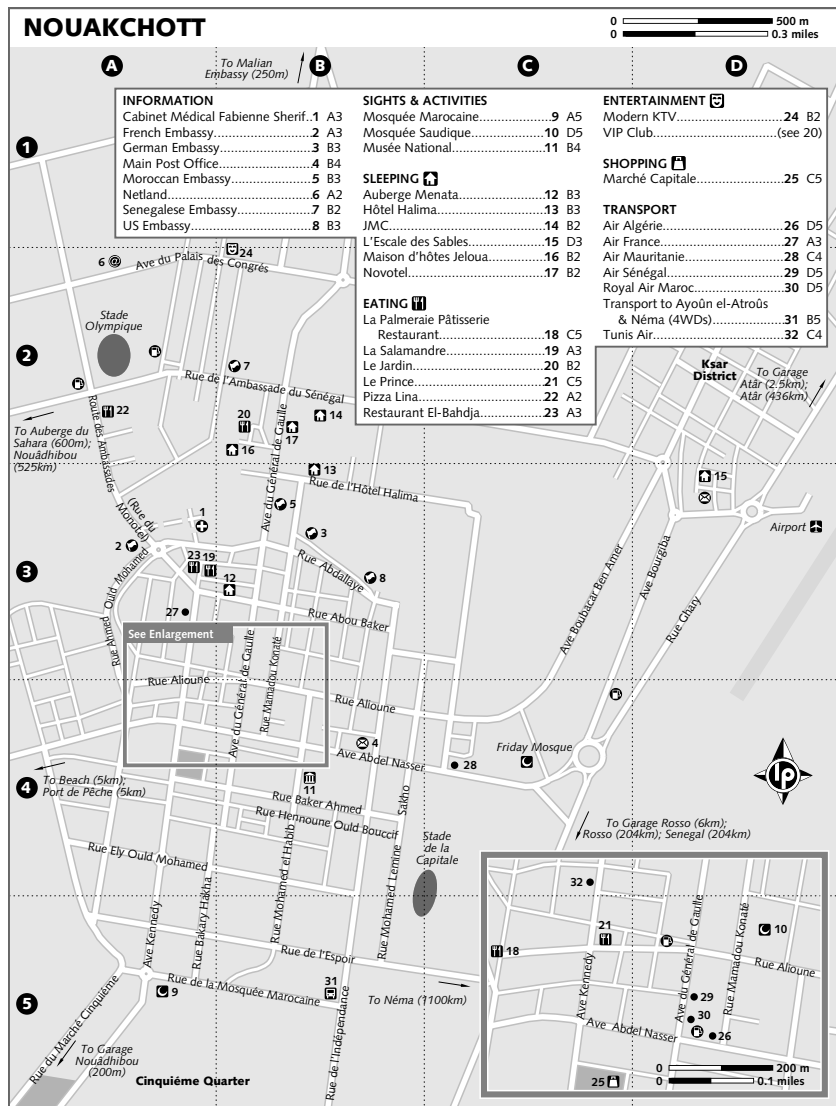
hard to beat, with first-rate facilities. Credit cards are accepted.

EATING & DRINKING

Restaurant El-Bahdja (☎ 630 5383; mains UM1500-3000; 🍴 lunch & dinner) The El-Bahdja is justly revered for its excellent Moroccan-inspired menu at very reasonable prices. The *tajine* is

palate-blowing. The restaurant is off Route des Ambassades.

La Palmeraie Pâtisserie Restaurant (☎ 642 0212; Rue Alioune; mains UM1500-2500; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Warm yourself with a *lotte grillée* (grilled monkfish) or a *filet de dorade* (sea bream fillet) at this snazzy-but-not-snooty venue. The outdoor seating is particularly



inviting. Also recommended for breakfast (about UM1800).

Pizza Lina (☎ 525 8662; Route des Ambassades; mains UM1500-3500; ☒ lunch & dinner) One of Nouakchott's best choices when it comes to tasty pizzas. Also features meat and fish dishes, as well as pasta.

La Salamandre (☎ 524 2680; mains UM1600-4000; ☒ Mon-Sat) La Salamandre has garnered warm praise for lip-smacking French cooking. The sleek, colourful setting is another draw. It's off Route des Ambassades.

Le Jardin (☎ 636 7660; mains UM3000-4000; ☒ lunch & dinner) This upscale venue is recommended if you want to dine in style. The mellow open-air terrace is a killer. It's off Rue de l'Ambassade du Sénégal.

There are many fast-food establishments on Rue Alioune between Ave Kennedy and Ave du Général de Gaulle. Most have a Lebanese bent. Pick of the bunch is **Le Prince** (Rue Alioune; mains UM500-1300; ☒ lunch & dinner), with faultlessly cooked *shwarma* (sliced meat stuffed into a pocket of bread with vegetables).

Most European-style restaurants usually serve alcohol. La Salamandre, with its spiffy setting, and Le Jardin, with its open-air terrace and cosy interior, were the flavour of the month when we visited.

ENTERTAINMENT

Don't come to Nouakchott to wallow in revelry, but if you want to tear it up beneath the strobe lights head to **Modern KTV** (Ave du Palais des Congrès) or **VIP Club** (☎ 636 7660), off Rue de l'Ambassade du Sénégal. Both places feature regular live musicians and Senegalese DJs at weekends.

SHOPPING

You'll find a bit of everything at Marché Capitale (also called Grand Marché), on Ave Kennedy, including brass teapots, silver jewelry, traditional wooden boxes and colourful fabrics.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Airlines with offices in Nouakchott:

Air Algérie (☎ 525 2059; www.airalgerie.dz; cnr Ave du Général de Gaulle & Ave Abdel Nasser)

Air France (☎ 525 1808, 525 3916; www.airfrance.com; Ave Kennedy)

Air Mauritanie (☎ 525 2216, 525 8098; www.airmauritaniae.mr; Ave Abdel Nasser)

Air Senegal (☎ 525 0584; www.air-senegal-international.com; Ave du Général de Gaulle)

Royal Air Maroc (☎ 525 3564; www.royalairmaroc.com; Ave Abdel Nasser)

Tunis Air (☎ 525 8763; www.tunisair.com.tr; Ave Kennedy)

For details of international and domestic flights to/from Nouakchott, see p431 and p432.

Land

For Nouâdhibou (about UM5600, six hours), the Garage Nouâdhibou is close to Cinquième Marché; for Rosso (about UM2000, 3½ hours), the Garage Rosso is almost 10km south of the centre; for Atâr (UM3500, six hours), the Garage Atâr is on the road to Atâr, about 3km north of the airport; for Ayoûn el-Atrous (UM6000, 14 hours) and Néma (UM7500, up to two days), 4WDs leave from an open area at the corner of Rues de l'Indépendance and Rue de la Mosquée Marocaine.

GETTING AROUND

It costs UM300 for a taxi ride within the centre. From the airport, the standard taxi fare to the centre is about UM1000, but it's cheaper to hail a taxi from the highway nearby (UM300).

THE ATLANTIC COAST

No tacky resorts. No pollution. This coastline is a rapturous place for tranquillity seekers and nature-lovers. It's mostly occupied by the Parc National du Banc d'Arguin, something of a pilgrimage site for bird-watchers.

NOUÂDHIBOU

pop 80,000

With the new tar road connecting the Moroccan border to Nouakchott, the fishing port of Nouâdhibou has lost much of its *raison d'être* for travellers, who prefer to dash to the capital or to the Adrar region. It's a good base, though, if you plan to visit Banc d'Arguin. The setting is also appealing: Nouâdhibou is on the Baie du Lévrier, in the middle of a narrow 35km-long peninsula.

There are several bureaux de change along the city's main drag, Blvd Médián, and most of the internet outlets along here also double as telephone offices. The 'station' is about

5km south of town. If they have not done it at the border, overland travellers with vehicles must buy insurance at any insurance company in town.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping Abba (☎ 574 9896; fax 574 9887; Blvd Médian; tent per person UM1500, s/d UM2200/3400; (P)) A safe bet for overlanders. It has simple rooms – some with private bathrooms – and an inviting communal room with notice board.

Camping Baie du Lévrier (☎ 574 6536, 650 4356; Blvd Médian; s/d UM3000/5000; (P)) This long-standing fave with a casual feel is excellent value and Ali, your hospitable host, is a good source of local information. Accommodation is in clean four-bed rooms, and there's a tent for relaxing and a kitchen.

Hôtel Al Jezira (☎ 574 5317; fax 574 5499; Blvd Maritime; s/d incl breakfast UM13,000/15,000; (P) (X)) A notch up the comfort scale, this dependable mid-range option north of the centre offers good amenities and spruce (if a wee bit impersonal) rooms. Yes, there's air-con!

Restaurant-Pâtisserie Pleine Lune (☎ 574 9860; off Blvd Médian; mains UM1000-1500) For a quick bite, nothing beats this cute eatery off the main drag. It serves grilled fish and *brochettes* (skewered meat); finish off your meal with a delectable croissant.

Le Mérou (☎ 574 5980; Blvd Médian; mains UM1500-2500) The main-drag setting of this long-standing is unimpressive but the wide-ranging menu, with a Chinese bent, covers enough territory to please most palates. Think meat and fish dishes, as well as salads (the octopus salad is superb).

You'll find a slew of very cheap restaurants on or near the main drag.

Getting There & Away

Air Mauritanie has four weekly flights to/from Nouakchott. Bush taxis travel daily between Nouâdhibou and Nouakchott (UM5600, six hours).

The iron-ore train with a passenger car leaves around 2.30pm daily, arriving in Choûm (UM1000, or UM3000 for a 'berth') around 2am, where 4WDs for Atâr will be waiting. For more details, see p433.

PARC NATIONAL DU BANC D'ARGUIN

This must-see **park** (admission per person per day UM1200) is an important stopover and breeding ground for multitudes of birds migrating be-

tween Europe and southern Africa, especially in December and January. It extends 200km north from Cape Timiris (155km north of Nouakchott) and 235km south of Nouâdhibou. The ideal way to approach the birds is by traditional fishing boat, best organised from the fishing village of **Iwik** (UM15,000, plus UM3000 for the guide).

Inside the park there are official camp sites that are equipped with traditional tents (UM3000 to UM6000 per tent). Meals can also be ordered.

There's no public transport to the Banc d'Arguin. Your best bet to visit the park is to hire a 4WD with a knowledgeable driver, either in Nouakchott or in Nouâdhibou. Consider taking three days.

THE ADRAR

Here is the jewel in Mauritania's crown. North of the country, the Adrar boasts exceptional natural wonders and distinctive cultural sights. There are the ancient Saharan towns of Chinguetti and Ouadâne, mighty sand dunes that look sculpted by an artist, mellow oases where you can unwind under a Moorish tent, and grandiose basaltic plateaus. Camel rides, trekking routes and even hot-air ballooning are on offer. For desert aficionados, the Adrar is simply a must.

ATÂR

pop 25,000

With the grandiose Adrar on your doorstep, this secluded town in the middle of the desert is an excellent place in which to organise camel or 4WD forays into the dune fields.

A large *rond-point* (roundabout) marks the centre of Atâr and the market is just north of it. You'll find several bureaux de change, banks (US dollars and euros) and telephone offices on or around the main drag. Atâr had only one internet café at the time of writing.

Activities

At last count, more than 20 agencies were attempting to arrange **camel rides** or **4WD tours** from Atâr. Your best bet is to shop around.

The main costs are the vehicle and driver, so trips are a lot cheaper if you're in a group. Count on paying up to UM21,000 per day for a Toyota Hilux plus petrol. Add about UM3000 per day per person for food.

Most travel agencies also organise custom camel rides in the Adrar. Prices start at UM12,000 per day with food and lodging.

Sleeping & Eating

These days Atâr has 20-plus places to stay. Most places serve meals (about UM2000). From the roundabout head east on the Chinguetti road for a block, then turn left – most cheap restaurants are along this road.

Auberge Bab Sahara (☎ 647 3966; justus_buma@yahoo.com; tents per person UM1500, stone hut UM7000; Ⓟ) Off Route de Azougui, this longstanding backpacker haunt is run by a Dutch/German couple. *Tikits* (traditional huts) and tents are nothing thrilling but tidy enough and the courtyard is a pleasant place to mooch around. It's away from the action but it's quiet.

Auberge du Bonheur (☎ 546 4537; fax 546 4347; tent or hut per person UM1700, r without bathroom UM6000; Ⓟ) A sensible choice for budgeteers, a five-minute stroll from the centre. Facilities include five rooms with air-con, a large tent in the courtyard, several poky stone or palm huts and a well-scrubbed ablution block. The owners have a reputable travel agency.

Auberge Tivoujar (☎ 678 1342, 625 5182; www.vuedenhaut.com; tent/tikit per person half board UM5500/7000; Ⓟ) This newish professionally run venture sports excellent amenities and scrupulously clean bathrooms. The only quibble is the location, about 4km from the centre on the road to Nouakchott.

Auberge Monod (☎ 546 4236; Route de Chinguetti; s/d UM7000/8000; Ⓟ) A mere hop, skip and a jump from the market, this modernish abode features serviceable rooms with spacious bathrooms.

Restaurant Marocain (Route de Chinguetti; mains UM500-700) Next door to de l'Amitié, this place rustles up some good couscous as well as various nibbles.

Restaurant de l'Amitié (☎ 610 7150; Route de Chinguetti; set menu UM2500; Ⓟ closed May-Aug) If you're after a bit more sophistication, your best bet is this welcoming eatery run by a French lady, with pleasant outdoor seating at the rear.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Point Afrique flies from Paris to Atâr via Mar-seilles. For details see p431.

BUSH TAXI

The main *gare routière*, in the heart of town, is where you can get vehicles for Choûm

(UM2000, two hours) and Nouakchott (UM3500, six hours).

Battered 4WDs headed for Chinguetti (UM2000, two hours) leave from near a shop located a block north of Auberge Monod. For Ouadâne (UM2500, four hours), they leave from a street north of the roundabout. For both towns, services are infrequent. For Terjit (UM1000, one hour), infrequent 4WDs leave from near the roundabout.

TERJIT

If all you want is to laze a couple of days away in an enchanting palm grove, make a beeline for Terjit, about 40km south of Atâr as the crow flies. What's special here is a natural pool in which you can swim – bliss after the rigours of the desert. You pay UM1000 to enter the site.

The main spring has been taken over by **Auberge Oasis de Terjit** (☎ 644 8967, in Atâr 546 5020; tents or huts per person UM1500), where a mattress in a tent by the trickling stream is on offer. A meal costs about UM1500. The only other place to stay is the **Auberge des Caravanes** (r or tikits per person UM1500; Ⓟ), an honest-to-goodness place at the entrance of the village.

To get here by private car, drive 40km south of Atâr on the road to Nouakchott, then turn left at the checkpoint and follow a sandy track for 11km. By public transport, take anything headed towards Nouakchott and hitch a ride from the checkpoint.

CHINGUETTI

pop 4000

One of the more attractive of the ancient caravan towns in the Sahara, Chinguetti is shrouded with a palpable historic aura. Once famous for its Islamic scholars, it was the ancient capital of the Moors, and some of the buildings date from the 13th century. The heavenly backdrop, with a sea of picture-postcard sand dunes, is another draw.

Sights & Activities

The highlight of any visit is a wander through the labyrinthine lanes of **Le Ksar** (the Old Town). The principal attraction is the 16th-century stone mosque (no entry to non-Muslims). Also of great interest are the five old libraries, which house the fragile-as-dust ancient Islamic manuscripts of Chinguetti.

The best way to see the fascinating dunes around Chinguetti is by camel. Numerous *méharées* (camel trips) are available. Stand-

ard costs start from UM8000 per person per day for the camel, food and guide. Any reputable travel agency in Atâr or *auberge* owner can arrange **camel rides**. If you don't want to sweat it out, you can hire a 4WD and driver. They cost from UM18,000 per day, petrol not included.

The dunes from above? Yes, it's possible. Auberge Tivoujar (opposite), a reputable outfit based in Atâr, can organise **hot-air ballooning trips** from Atâr or Chinguetti (about US\$200 per person).

Sleeping & Eating

All the places listed here have shared bathroom unless stated otherwise. Breakfast and meals are available on request (about UM2000 per meal).

Auberge des Caravanes (☎ 540 0022; fax 546 4272; New Town; r per person UM1500) With its eye-catching traditional architecture, it's hard to miss this well-run place right in the centre of town. It's popular with tour groups and is thus a good place to meet other travellers, but it feels a wee bit impersonal.

Auberge Abweir (☎ 540 0124; New Town; stone hut or tent per person UM2500) Next door to Auberge des Caravanes, this welcoming place features a bunch of simple yet well-organised stone huts and small tents set around a plant-filled courtyard.

Les Mille et Une Nuits (Le Ksar; stone huts UM3000) A very neat place, close to Le Maure Bleu, run by Leila, a Mauritanian lady. Impeccable bathrooms, well-designed stone huts and a manicured courtyard dappled in sunshine.

Le Maure Bleu (☎ 540 0154, 546 5130; www.maurebleu.com; Old Town; tent per person UM2500, r or stone hut s/d UM5200/8400) This French-run peach of a place features well-arranged rooms and *tikits*, as well as *khaïmas* (nomad's tents) for shoestringers. The soothing courtyard is a great place to unwind.

L'Eden de Chinguetti (☎ 540 0014; New Town; r per person UM5500) In this 'Garden of Eden' you can expect tidy rooms (with proper beds) embellished with knick-knacks, as well as a clean-smelling ablution block. The owner, Mahmoud, is a mine of information.

Dar Sahra (☎ 630 1874, 540 0244; Le Ksar; d incl breakfast €60; ☺) This ultracharming *maison d'hôtes* (guesthouse) smack bang in the Old Town is an excellent base if you want to kick back in style, with a cushy setting, professional service and tastefully decorated rooms.

Getting There & Away

There is at least one vehicle a day to/from Atâr (UM2000, about two hours). They leave from just behind the market. There are no bush taxis between Chinguetti and Ouadâne; you'll have to go back to Atâr.

OUADÂNE

Sitting on the edge of the Adrar plateau, 120km northeast of Chinguetti, Ouadâne is one of the most enchanting semi-ghost towns of the Sahara. As you arrive across the sands or plateau from Atâr or Chinguetti, the stone houses of **Le Ksar al Kiali** (Old Quarter) seem to tumble down the cliff. The top of the hill is dominated by the minaret of the new mosque, which is a mere 200 years old, while at the western end, at the base of the town, is the 14th-century **old mosque**. In between, the crumbling structures seem to have been piled up higgledy-piggledy by some giant child playing with building blocks. Like Chinguetti, Ouadâne was a place of scholarship and is home to over 3000 manuscripts held in private libraries. Only 20 to 30 families still live in the old town.

All places to stay can prepare meals for their guests (about UM2000 for lunch or dinner). The places listed here are down on the plateau. Mellow **Auberge Vask – Chez Zaida** (☎ 681 7669; tikits or tents per person UM1500) is run by Zaida, a congenial lady who goes out of her way to make your stay a happy one. There are five *tikits* and a couple of nomad's tents. Rooms at **Auberge Warane I** (☎ in Atâr 546 4604; r or tents per person UM1600) are a bit bunkerlike but serviceable enough, but **Auberge Agoueidir – Chez Isselmou** (☎ 525 0791; Nouakchott; tikits or tents per person UM1700, d UM4000) is the best outfit, with orderly rooms (with proper beds), as well as a number of tents and *tikits*. The shared bathrooms won't make you squirm and the well-tended sand-floored courtyard is a good place to idle away.

Finding transport to Ouadâne is not easy. Atâr is a much better place to look than Chinguetti, as vehicles go between Atâr and Ouadâne every few days (every day, if you're lucky), but next to never from Chinguetti. The trip (UM2500) normally takes about four hours. If you're driving you have two alternatives: the southerly Piste du Batha, which passes through sand dunes and definitely requires a guide, and the northerly Piste du Dhar Chinguetti along the plateau, a road which is in very good condition.

THE ROAD TO MALI

Good news for overlanders: the Route de l'Espoir (Road of Hope) from Nouakchott to Néma (around 1100km) is now entirely tarred, and you can cover this monotonous stretch in two days.

The first major town on the road to the Malian border is **Kiffa** (population 30,000), an important regional trading centre and cross-roads, where you can bunk down at **Auberge Le Phare du Désert** (☎ 563 28 88; tikits UM10,000; 🍽️), on the outskirts of Kiffa.

You could also break up your journey at lively **Ayoûn el-Atroûs**, which is a good place to spend your last ouguiyas before crossing into Mali. For accommodation, try the unpretentious **Hôtel Ayoûn** (☎ 515 1462; s/d UM5000/8000; 🍽️), which is in the centre, or **Auberge Saada Tenzah** (☎ 515 1337, 641 1052; r UM5000-8000), about 3km east of the centre on the road to Néma.

The tarred road ends at **Néma**, the jumping-off point for Oualâta. You'll find several petrol pumps here, a couple of modest stores and a police station at which you can get your passport stamped. You can base yourself at **Complexe Touristique N'Gady** (☎ 513 0900; fax 513 0970; s/d bungalows UM7000/9000, r 12,000/15,000; 🍽️ 🚰), a few kilometres west of the centre.

For more details on reaching this area by public transport, see p426.

OUALÂTA

Possibly one of Mauritania's best-kept secrets, Oualâta is another ancient Saharan town high on atmosphere and personality. Dating from 1224, it used to be the last resting point for caravans heading for Timbuktu. It's about 100km north of Néma, but is definitely worth the gruelling ride to get there.

Entering the town you'll be struck by the red **mudbrick houses** adorned with decorative paintings on the exterior and interior. There's also a small museum and a library, which houses ancient Islamic manuscripts. There are also several rock paintings and archaeological sites in the vicinity. Various camel trips can also be organised (ask your hosts).

Although you're miles from anywhere, you'll find about six guesthouses to rest your weary limbs, including **Auberge Tayib/Gamni – Auberge de l'Hotel de Ville** (r per person UM3000) and **Auberge de l'Amitié** (r per person UM1500). A notch up, **Auberge Ksar Walata** (r per person UM5000) fea-

tures a lovely patio and attractive rooms. They all serve meals.

There are two dirt tracks between Néma and Oualâta (approximately 110km). Land Rovers ply the route between the two towns (UM2000, 2½ hours) on an infrequent basis. Ask around in Néma market.

MAURITANIA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Finding cheap accommodation (in the US\$8 to US\$15 range) is easy in cities and major towns. There's also a sprinkle of more expensive, air-conditioned hotels meeting international standards in Nouakchott and, to a lesser extent, Nouâdhibou and Atâr. In the desert, the most widespread accommodation is *auberges* or *campements* (traditional huts or tents that come equipped with mattresses on the floor).

ACTIVITIES

Camel rides and 4WD expeditions in the desert are the most popular activities. For bird-watching, nothing can beat the Parc National du Banc d'Arguin, one of the world's greatest birdlife-viewing venues.

BUSINESS HOURS

Although it's a Muslim country, for business purposes Mauritania adheres to the Monday to Friday working week. However, Friday is the main prayer day, so many businesses have an extended lunch break on Friday afternoon. Many shops are open every day.

CUSTOMS

It is illegal to bring alcohol into the country.

PRACTICALITIES

- Mauritania uses the metric system for weights and measures.
- Electrical current is 220V AC, 50Hz and most electrical plugs are of the European two-pin type.
- Mauritania's only TV station is TVM, with programmes in Arabic and French.
- For the news (in French), pick up *Le Calame* or *Horizons*.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Mauritania is one of the safest countries in Africa. A word of warning though: there are thousands of land mines buried along the Mauritanian side of the border with the Western Sahara, even as close as a few kilometres from Nouâdhibou.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Mauritanian Embassies & Consulates

Mauritania has embassies in Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Mali, Nigeria and Senegal, and a consulate in Niger. For more details, see the relevant country chapter.

Canada (☎ 613-237 3283; 121 Sherwood Dr, Ottawa K1Y 3V1)

France (☎ 01 45 48 23 88; 89 rue du Cherche-Midi, 75006 Paris)

Germany (☎ 030-20 65 88 30; Axel Springer Strasse 54, 10117 Berlin)

UK (☎ 020-7478 9323; 8 Carlos Palace, Mayfair, London W1K 3AS)

USA (☎ 202-232 5700; www.ambarim-dc.org; 2129 Leroy Pl NW, Washington, DC, 20008)

Embassies & Consulates in Mauritania

All embassies are open from Monday to Friday. Visa applications are received in the morning.

France (☎ 525 2337; Rue Ahmed Ould Mohamed)

Germany (☎ 525 1729; Rue Abdallaye)

Mali (☎ 525 4081, 525 4078; Tévragh Zeina) North of the centre.

Morocco (☎ 525 1411; Ave du Général de Gaulle)

Senegal (☎ 525 7290; Rue de l'Ambassade du Sénégal)

USA (☎ 525 2660; Rue Abdallaye)

HOLIDAYS

Public holidays include:

New Year's Day 1 January

National Reunification Day 26 February

Workers' Day 1 May

African Liberation Day 25 May

Army Day 10 July

Independence Day 28 November

Anniversary of the 1984 Coup 12 December

Mauritania also celebrates the usual Islamic holidays; see the Africa Directory chapter p1106.

INTERNET ACCESS

You'll find cybercafés in Nouakchott, Nouâdhibou and Atâr.

MONEY

The unit of currency is the ouguiya (UM). Euros and US dollars are the cash to carry and wads of cash it must be, because travellers cheques and credit cards are pretty useless. Credit cards are accepted only at top-end hotels in Nouakchott.

TELEPHONE

You can make international calls and send faxes at post offices. The innumerable privately run phone shops in the major cities and towns cost about the same and are open late.

VISAS

Visas are required for all except nationals of Arab League countries and some African countries. In countries where Mauritania has no diplomatic representation, including Australia, French embassies will issue visas for around US\$30. Visas can also be issued at the Moroccan border (€20).

Visas for Onward Travel

For information on embassies and consulates, see left.

Mali Visas are issued the same day (UM6500) and are valid for one month. You need two photos and a photocopy of the information pages of your passport.

Morocco Single-/double-entry visas cost UM5800/8700 and are issued in 48 hours. You need two photos and photocopies of your passport and air ticket.

Senegal One-month visas (UM1500) are issued in 24 hours. You need four photos.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Mauritania is a conservative Muslim country but it is by no means the most extreme in this regard. Women might get the odd bit of sexual harassment, but it's nothing in comparison with some North African countries. It's wise to dress modestly.

TRANSPORT IN MAURITANIA

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Nouakchott, Nouâdhibou and Atâr have international airports. Nouakchott's airport handles most traffic.

Mauritania's national carrier, Air Mauritanie, flies to Paris, Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire),

Bamako (Mali), Casablanca (Morocco), Cotonou (Benin), Dakar (Senegal), Las Palmas (Canary Islands) and Pointe-Noire (Congo).

Point Afrique (☎ in France 00 33 4 75 97 20 40; www.point-afrique.com) flies between Paris and Marseilles and Atâr from the end of October to the end of April, while Air France has flights between Paris and Nouakchott. Fares from Paris start at US\$550.

Air Senegal operates between Dakar and Nouakchott, while Royal Air Maroc has flights between Nouakchott and Casablanca. Tunis Air connects Nouakchott with Tunis (Tunisia), while Air Algérie flies to Algiers. From Casablanca, Tunis or Algiers, there are many connections to Europe and the Middle East.

For flights to New Zealand, Europe and the USA see p1116.

All airlines flying to/from Nouakchott have an office in the capital (see p426).

Land MALI

At the time of research, the most straightforward route to Mali was from Ayoûn el-Atroûs to Nioro. You can also cross at Néma, Timbedgha (both connecting with Nara in Mali) and Kiffa (connecting with Nioro in Mali).

From Nouakchott, you can catch bush taxis to Néma and Ayoûn el-Atroûs. From these places you can catch a bush taxi to Niara or Nioro. It's also possible to travel from Sélibaby to Kayes.

If crossing into Mali, have your passport stamped by police at the first town you reach after crossing the border. You must also clear customs, which is done in Néma or Ayoûn el-Atroûs.

MOROCCO

The only border crossing between Morocco and Mauritania is north of Nouâdhibou. Crossing this border is straightforward; the road is now entirely tarred to Nouakchott, except for the 3km no-man's-land that separates the two border posts. Coming from Morocco, you can buy the Mauritanian visa at the border (€20). Expect to pay another €20 for various 'taxes' on top of the visa price. Although there are no longer any currency declaration forms, some customs officials still ask for it and, of course, if you can't present it, they will expect a small bribe.

Note that there's no public transport between Morocco and Mauritania.

HOT TIP: CROSSING INTO SENEGAL

If you want to avoid the hassles at Rosso, you can take a bush taxi from Rosso to Diamma (Keur Massène) and cross at Diamma. The border at Diamma is open 24 hours (it's a bridge) and the hassles are reportedly less problematic (although you'll probably be asked for an 'extra hours tax' if you cross at night). This option is possible in the dry season only.

SENEGAL

The main border crossing for Senegal is at Rosso but it's also possible to cross at Diamma (Keur Massène), west of Rosso. When crossing into Senegal at Rosso, note that immigration is only open on the Mauritanian side from 8am to noon and 3pm to 6pm. The border crossing here is notorious for its hassles.

From Dakar to Nouakchott by public transport usually takes from 11 to 13 hours depending on the wait at the border. Most minibuses and bush taxis leave Dakar before 10am to be sure of arriving in Rosso well before the border closing time (6pm). At Rosso, most travellers without vehicles cross by pirogue (UM200/CFA500, five minutes) as the ferry crosses only four times daily.

Be prepared for some confrontation with customs officials who usually ask for 'exit taxes'.

GETTING AROUND Air

Air Mauritanie flies from Nouakchott to Nouâdhibou, Kiffa, Ayoûn el Atroûs, Sélibaby and Zouérat.

Bush Taxi

Mercedes taxis, Peugeot taxis, Land Rovers and minibuses, in descending order of cost, are the four types of public transport. Bush taxis go to all the major towns daily.

Car & Motorcycle

Consider renting a 4WD and driver if you want to reach more remote parts of the country. The standard Toyota Hilux usually costs around UM21,000 per day for the vehicle, plus petrol.

Expect police checkpoints at the entrance and exit of each town.

AN EPIC JOURNEY ON THE IRON-ORE TRAIN

We will never forget the experience – neither will you. The Zouérat to Nouâdhibou train is the longest in the world, typically 2.3km long. When it arrives at the ‘station’ in Nouâdhibou, a decrepit building in the open desert, a seemingly endless number of ore wagons pass by before the passenger carriage at the rear appears. Then the stampede to get on board begins. The lucky ones find a place on one of the two long benches; the rest stand or sit on the floor, or perch on the roof for free. There are also a dozen ‘berths’ that are so worn out that you can see the springs. The atmosphere can be quite jovial, with people playing cards on the floor. In the late afternoon, many men find space on the floor to pray and at dusk when the cabin becomes totally dark, chanting begins. On board, a man sells tea and cheap snacks. Take enough clothes to keep warm, as it can get cold at night. For more details see p427.

Tours

There are travel agencies in Nouakchott that offer tours around the country but it’s not a bad idea to arrange a tour with a more regionally focused company, eg in Atâr for the Adrar. Travel is usually by 4WD but you can opt for trekking tours or camel rides. If there are at least four travellers, prices should average around UM20,000 per person per day.

Train

The Nouâdhibou to Zouérat train (see above) is an iron-ore train with no passenger terminals, however it has become a passenger train for lack of better alternatives. The entire trip takes 16 to 18 hours, but most travellers choose to get off at Choûm, 12 hours from Nouâdhibou, and continue on by bush taxi to Atâr.